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“Dancer”-Actor of Jerzy Grotowski

Abstract

Watching after many years the documentaries of performances of the Laboratory Theatre, Grotowski discovered that they were **sung performances**, of which fact he had not been aware. They were also **danced**. Grotowski had already come up with the idea of a dancing actor when he was working on *Shakuntala* (1960). A very important inspiration to him was a short text, which he had read as a student (1950-1955), by M. Limanowski – *Sztuka aktora* [*Actor's Craft*] (1919), while Limanowski himself became one of the forerunners of theatre anthropology.

In his work Grotowski revived the antique tradition of *the triune unity of chorea* – music, dance and singing united in one whole, the thread of which was dance. Here came to life, “unprecedented in the history of theatre, the creation of the formula of a performance of initiation ritual [...], the innovation of which was the result of reaching out to the archaic sources of theatre” (L. Flaszen). *Action* (staged from 1988 onwards) combines both the Christian and the mystery traditions. The symbolism of initiation, common to Dionysus, Zagreus and Jesus, is related to the god-child and it reveals the mystery of “rebirth”, as in “an ethnodrama”, “a dramatic religion”.

A documentary made in 1993 in Italy by Marianne Ahrne, the last film with the personal participation of Grotowski, was summed up by him in this reflection:

“Now, when I watch *Akropolis* and other performances that I created when I was young, I notice that already by that time they were sung performances. When I was working on them, I was not aware of it. I did not even think then that they were sung. And now, when I watch old film material, I see that it is sung.”¹

¹ The recording based on the soundtrack of the television film *Il Teatr Laboratorio di Jerzy Grotowski*, realised as the last – fifth – episode of the series: *Cinque sensi del teatro. Cinque trasmissioni monografiche sulla filosofia del teatro*. Production: Centro per la Sperimentazione e la Ricerca Teatrale, Pontedera, RAI-Radio Televisione Italiana, Sede Regionale della Lombardia – Dipartimento Scuola/Educazione. Edited by Mario Raimondo,

However, what is equally important and what he has never directly said – as far as I know – about his own performances, as well as about his successive undertakings until the last one, that is, the opus *Action*, is that all of them were **danced** in a way. There always was a dancing actor, a dancing human being. As in Grotowski's early talk *Gra w Śiwę. Przypisek do praktyki* [*Playing Shiva. A Footnote to Practice*], which has never been published. He delivered it during one of the Seminars of the Theatre of 13 Rows in Opole, in the autumn of 1960, in relation to his work on the performance of *Shakuntala* (after Kālidāsa), and in October of the same year presented at the directing exam at the Ludwik Solski State Theatre School in Cracow. This is where he developed for the first time his idea of a dancing actor, which was significant for the classical oriental tradition, in which terms "an actor" and a "dancer" are principally synonymous (Barba, Savarese 1991):

"The mythological patron of the old Indian Theatre was Shiva, the Cosmic Dancer, who, dancing, «gives birth» to all that is and who «shatters» all that is; and who «dances the *whole*» [...]

If I had to define our theatrical quest in one sentence with one term, I would refer to the myth about the dance of Shiva. I would say: «We are playing at being Shiva. We are acting out Shiva».

There is an attempt here to absorb reality as if from all sides, in the multiplicity of its aspects, and at the same time – remaining as if we were outside, at a distance, in the extreme distance.

So, in other words, this is a dance of form, the pulsation of form, the fluid diffusion of a multiplicity of theatrical conventions, styles, acting traditions. It is a construction of opposites: intellectual play in spontaneity, seriousness in the grotesque, derision in pain. This is the dance of form which shatters all theatrical illusion, all «verisimilitude to life.» [...]

The ancient Indian theatre, like the ancient Japanese and Greek theatres, was not a «presentation» of reality (that is, a construction of illusions), but rather a dancing of reality (a false construction something on the order of a «rhythmic vision» that refers to reality).

The mime dance in the liturgy of Pashupatis (shaivist sect) was one of the six main ritual acts. [...]

A performance must become [...] «dancing» the reality, a ritual play. [...]

We do not demonstrate action to the viewer; we invite him [...] to take part in the «shamanism» in which the living, immediate presence of the viewer is part of the playacting. [...]

To all appearances, we «heal» ourselves with tautology: the necessity of death explains itself through the necessity of death, the fate of man through the fate of man. But the tautology is only seemingly apparent, because between the question and the confirmation, the perspective from which we see has changed. Now we try to see as if from the outside, as if from «all sides». [...]

There is the mythological quotation: «Shiva says... I am without name, without form, and without action. [...] I am pulse, movement, rhythm.»
(Osiński 1980: 79-80; Osiński 1986: 49-50)²

Already in this text by 27-year-old Grotowski we find a distinct aspiration to what after almost thirty years Peter Brook – having learnt about the work of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski – would call “art as a vehicle” (Brook 1997).

In 1960 the art of theatre was to the author of *Shakuntala* a kind of challenge to create “the cosmic dance” and a particular interaction between theatre and ritual, a search for possibilities of practical incorporation of the ritual into the living context of the present times. He showed it then by the example of the dance of Shiva, who in India is considered “the Divine Dancer”, “the Dancing God”, “the Great Dancer” and “the King of Dancers”. In 1969, Maria Krzysztof Byrski published the article *Grotowski a tradycja indyjska* [*Grotowski and the Indian Tradition*] (Byrski 1969), where he also presented, among others, this problem, and almost thirty years later he concluded the text *Taniec między bytem i nicością* [*A Dance between Being and Nothingness*] with such a statement:

“The character of the Dancing God is extremely popular in India, and in fact it could be recognised as an emblem of Indian culture. It was also a subject of interest for both Indian and European researchers. Among the most interesting studies is an outstanding essay of an Indian scholar, Ananda Coomaraswami, entitled *The Dance of Shiva*, in the collection of the same title, published in New York in 1957. We owe a similar essay also to Heinrich Zimmer. It is in the collection entitled *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, published also in New York in 1946. Although they are not the most recent publications, their theses are still current.” (Byrski 1997: 19)

This was also the case for Grotowski: “the cosmic dancer”, a dancer-actor, “a dancing human being” – became a kind of matrix, a model in the whole of his later creation. It is worth remembering that he had been aiming at it almost from the very beginning of his

² The writings of Jerzy Grotowski, among them unpublished texts (*Reżyserska „praca praktyczna” na temat „Ślubów pannieńskich” A[leksandra] Fredry and Gra w Sziwę. Przypisek do praktyki*) [*Directorial “practical work” to the topic of “Maidens’ Vows” by A[lexander] Fredro and Playing Shiva. A Footnote to Practice*], are in the files of the Ludwik Solski State Theatre School in Cracow.

creative path. In *Inwokacja do przedstawienia "Orfeusz"* [*Invocation to the Performance of "Orpheus"*] included in the programme for his first performance after he had taken over the management of the Theatre of 13 Rows in Opole, he wrote:

"We thank you, world, that you are.
We thank you that you are the infinite and eternal dancer.
We thank you that you dance your chaos [...], that we (curbing your chaos) have sculpted ourselves, our freedom.
We thank you that you dance your order: the order of your laws which is able to comprehend your laws [...].
We thank you, world, that we have consciousness which lets us overcome death: understand our eternity in your eternity. And that in this all love is a teacher, an alphabet. We thank you that we are not separated from you, that we are you, that it is in us that you achieve self-consciousness, the awakening.
We thank you, world, that you are."³

And in the final scene of *Cain* by Byron, the premiere of which took place on 30 January 1960 in Opole, before the eyes of spectators on a screen placed in the centre of the stage an inscription appeared, also written by Grotowski:

"Alpha = Omega = world!
The world is a unity though it dances infinitively, [...] from the element to the brain-storming, it means from Alfa to Omega. From amusement to pain [...].
It lasts, and the fun is rather how not to separate from it [...]. And do not believe in ghosts. And at your own pain giggle somehow [...]."⁴

Thus, already in his first directorial works Grotowski aspired to a realisation of the idea of "the cosmic dance". One can say that his performances were danced in a way. As in *Sztuka aktora* [*Actor's Craft*] by Mieczysław Limanowski, a text that Grotowski learned about during his first year of acting studies from Halina Gallowa, one of the main actresses and pedagogues in the Reduta Theatre. Grotowski told me that he had copied it with his own hand from the issue of the "Scena Polska" ["Polish Stage"] of December 1919 (Limanowski 1994: 6-10) kept in the Jagiellonian Library, and from then on he had carried it in his black briefcase.

Incidentally, Limanowski was one of the great teachers of the father of professor Maria Krzysztof Byrski, Tadeusz Byrski (1906-1976), who used to speak about him in

³ The Theatre of 13 Rows, „Materiały – Dyskusje” [“Materials – Discussions”] 1. Opole, October 1959.

⁴ The same text was included in the programme for the performance: the Theatre of 13 Rows. „Materiały – Dyskusje” [“Materials – Discussions”] 2. Opole, January 1960.

a beautiful and wise way, which I had the pleasure and honour to witness, and who also wrote about him in his book (Byrski T., 1976) and articles (Osiński 2005).

I have already written on a topic which is an important for Grotowski, that is the tradition of the studies and research undertaken by him, as well as his ethical tradition and that of the company of the Laboratory Theatre (Osiński 1980: 284-311; 1993: 147-234; 2003: 423-478). No wonder then that these issues were also intensively present in his Paris lectures as Professor of Theatre Anthropology at Collège de France. Grotowski discussed it especially with reference to the examples of Konstantin Stanislavski, the Reduta and Jacek Woźniak. He mentioned the Reduta for the first time during his second lecture of 9 June 1997, on the stage of the Odéon – Théâtre de l'Europe; the same stage on which thirty one years earlier the Laboratory Theatre from Wrocław started out on its way in the world:

“After the First World War there was a theatre the Reduta. In the 1920s it was attacked, but afterwards it became a legend. It was created by Osterwa. The actors did not even use the word «theatre»; they called themselves «the Reduta ensemble». They performed classical and contemporary plays.

In the period of the Laboratory Theatre, when we were attacked very much by the theatre circles in Poland, the very old actors who had once worked in the Reduta became our friends and defended us. The point was also that in the Reduta they had started to look for something more, something above, something new. It is they who also invented this idea of treating a **spectator as a witness**, as a witness of an act. This is something I appreciated very much and this was a tradition of the Laboratory Theatre.

Turning towards the future. Not only what is happening in the domain of theatre. During my life, I have also studied some ancient traditions, not only European, which motivated me to create theatre. In this sense, the tradition to me is not only the theatrical tradition, but generally speaking: the tradition of a search, searching for what a human being can do with him or herself. As if to jump higher than his or her own head.”⁵

He spoke again about the Reduta on 16 June 1997, at the end of his third lecture also delivered in the Odéon, and for the last time – on 20 October 1997 in Conservatoire National Supérieure d'Art Dramatique, in his seventh lecture, when he provided the interpretation of Limanowski's text already mentioned above. At the same time it was the only case when “Teatr Reduta w Polsce między wojnami” [“The Reduta Theatre in Poland between the wars”] was offered by Grotowski himself as one of the official topics next to: “Druga perspektywa” [“The Second Perspective”] in the performing arts; Analysis of the document of Diego Carpitello and the equipe of Ernesto de Martino;

⁵ Lecture 2: Odéon – Théâtre de l'Europe, 9 June 1997. Emphasis Z.O.

The function of spectator in "the second perspective": witness; A tale about the King of Mirrors and his dreams: analogies with some kind of "hypnotising" theatre; Deep and fundamental difference between profanation and blasphemy. Relation between body and process: the point is not "Physical theatre".

We can guess that earlier references to the Reduta constituted a form of an announcement of the fundamental discussion on this topic:

"In the Reduta Theatre there were two bosses, two directors: one was a great actor and an equally remarkable director; while the other was a professor of geology named Limanowski, a specialist in geology famous in the whole of Europe, who was incredibly intelligent and disciplined, being at the same time a mad soul. He wrote, among other things a short text entitled *Sztuka aktora* [*Actor's Craft*].

The text is a conversation between an actor and a non-actor – a representative of the so-called creative arts. The conversation concerned the issue of whether an actor's work is creative or just consists in re-creating a role, which means executing one's work the way a musician in a symphonic orchestra does whose task is just to re-play a score. In those days, but also today, such an opinion used to be expressed. It was believed that an actor's work cannot in any measure be creative.

Limanowski, however, was of a different opinion. In order to justify his thesis he made an example of a painting done by a Japanese artist of the 19th century; a painting representing a view of waves surging in the ocean. Limanowski said that if one took a good look at how this painting was executed, one could ascertain that in order to achieve an effect of the moving ocean, the painter had to work with his whole body, not only with his hands holding brushes. He also said: «Observe a real painter at work. You will see then that he dances his picture when drawing lines on the canvas. His movement closer to the canvas, which in fact resembles the movement in dance, is preceded by a kind of culmination point at which he will apply the paint. If one put colours of paint on the spots where he left his footprints on the ground, one would see a choreographical set.»

I read this text during my studies in a theatre school. The words spoken by Limanowski were very important to me and I was very impressed by them.

The author touched here the key problem. He stated that the proper process of the creation of a painting is preceded by a kind of line that recalls, one can say, a line of modern and not of classical dance; a line which has to fold out into the final moment, where a shape is being drawn or paint applied, that is the culmination point of this process."⁶

⁶ Lecture 6: Conservatoire National Supérieure d'Art Dramatique, 20 October 1997.

In such a perspective Mieczysław Limanowski with his idea of a “dancer”-actor or “dancing actor” (Osiński 2000: 174-186) appeared to Grotowski to be one of his most important inspirations in terms of understanding the actor’s craft, and at the same time one of the precursors of theatre anthropology (Osiński 2003: 333-370, 664-671), when he spoke about it at Collège de France.

Eugenio Barba turns our attention to the fact that Grotowski always carried out his personal search in a deep symbiosis with another person:

“When I left Opole after a period of nearly three years, he embarked on this sort of relationship with Ryszard Cieślak. The result was extraordinary: *The Constant Prince*. So too was the incredible deepening of the training which was revealed to me during the seminars that Grotowski and Cieślak held at Odin Teatret each summer from 1966 to 1969. When Grotowski became involved in paratheatre in the seventies, his privileged companion became Jacek Zmysłowski whom I never met. He died in America of leukemia in February 1982. When Grotowski spoke to me of him and of his death, his voice betrayed emotion. It is the only time I saw him with tears in his eyes. [...] Today it is Thomas Richards who has not only become Grotowski’s privileged collaborator, but also his official heir.” (Barba 1999: 26)

It is very important here to understand fully that each of these relationships was completely different. Besides, such an incredibly strong relationship with another person in a way had a prolongation also after the person’s death. For instance, in the nineties, after Ryszard Cieślak’s death, Grotowski spoke numerous times about his leading actor. He especially remembered their common work on *The Constant Prince* (while, which is worth mentioning, the subject of *Akropolis* vanished almost completely). But the entire world of Grotowski’s human relationships in that period focused almost exclusively on Cieślak.

To Zygmunt Molik, on the occasion of forty years of his artistic work, Grotowski sent only a short, one-sentence fax. And when I asked him to write at least a very short text about Antek Jahołkowski (for an occasional publication already being prepared by the Wrocław Centre, combined with an exhibition designed by Jerzy Gurawski), who after all was one of the leading actors of the Laboratory Theatre and undoubtedly belonged among the people most dedicated to Grotowski, he did not react at all, therefore I found that publishing the brochure became pointless.

They were dancer-actors. First, for a few years the protagonist was Zygmunt Molik, who, next to Rena Mirecka, was simply the most proficient in the whole company. Afterwards it was Zbigniew Cynkutis (Kordian, Faust), and after he had left – Ryszard Cieślak (Don Fernando in *The Constant Prince* and the Simpleton in *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*).

The image of Christ dancing with the twelve apostles during the Last Supper, known to Grotowski from one of the *New Testament* apocrypha,⁷ was always dear to him. In

⁷ Cf. *The Acts of Saint John* 94-96; *Acta Ioannis*.

his paratheatrical period the first among his “dancers” was Jacek Zmysłowski. The last, already in Pontedera, was Thomas Richards (Richards 1995; Richards 1997). But also those who never were protagonists either in the Laboratory Theatre, or in the Workcenter, were also “dancers”; while the protagonists always had tough competition and had to fight for their position in the company.

This is how Barba comments on Grotowski’s *Playing Shiva. The Footnote to Practice*:

“The dance of Shiva of which Grotowski speaks is not a metaphor. It is a personal vision of existence which, on the actor’s technical level is translated as organicity (pulsation and rhythm), on a dramaturgical level as the simultaneous presence of opposites (dialectic of apotheosis and derision) and on an aesthetic level as performance which refuses to give the illusion of reality and attempts to recreate the contractions, the dilations and the contrasts: its «dance».” (Barba 1999: 55)

It was actually present all the time in the Laboratory Theatre. In the very beginning of the eighties Ludwik Flaszen even used the term “dancing organism”, and he gave the following reasons:

“[...] if I am on the floor, I have a lot of space; I am closer to what is my animal inside me. Then the whole body speaks. Everything works. There is a different flow of energy in the organism which results in a different working of the mind. I do not know if it works better, but undoubtedly – differently. The organism is then more dancing-like.” (Miller 1983: 310)

Flaszen referred here to the image of dancing Socrates:

“I, for instance, cannot think efficiently while lecturing *ex cathedra* or sitting in a chair. We have recalled Socrates here. His thought used to function when he walked, danced, gesticulated. His thinking was connected to dance! Even if it was discursive.” (Miller 1983: 310)

The same thing can be said about Grotowski and to an even higher degree (I hope Flaszen forgives me this comparison). His public meetings, as well as everyday meetings with people, his way of reacting and coming into relation with somebody – it was actually a very specific kind of dance, of dancing, and at the same time of “being danced”. Surprisingly similar to the one described once by Limanowski based on the example of the Japanese painter performing his particular dance in front of the easel, as well as on the image of dancing Socrates recalled by the co-creator of the Laboratory Theatre.

In the work of Grotowski, in his search, a tradition of *the triune unity of chorea* (the term coined by Tadeusz Zieliński) (Golik-Szarawarska 1999) was revived – i.e. music,

dance and singing joined in one – all that once used to be one art based on dance. “This art consisted in the expression of the feelings and urges of a human being, both by sounds and movements; by words, melody, as well as rhythm. In the name of *chorea* the important role of dance is emphasised: it stems from *chóros*, chorus, which originally meant a group dance, before it meant group singing.” (Tatarkiewicz 1985: 28-29) This unity is a triune unity, the Trinity, which contains music, dance and singing. Similar to Nicolas from Kuza, in his understanding of “triple oneness”, where “three are one as eternity can only be one” (Nicolas from Kuza 1996: 58-60).

“The cosmic dance”, “dancing Shiva”, “dancer-actor” of Mieczysław Limanowski, Christ dancing with the apostles, dancing dervishes and dancing Bauls from Bengal, candomblé dancers in Brazil and ritual Haitian voodoo dancers; finally the “danced” performances of Grotowski with their coryphaeus-solists of the actors’ chorus: Zygmunt Molik, Zbigniew Cynkutis and Ryszard Cieślak, Jacek Zmysłowski in the paratheatrical projects, and in the end, the dance of Thomas Richards in *Action* – Ludwik Flaszen wrote in a beautiful way that in his work Grotowski achieved “unprecedented in the history of theatre realisation of the formula of the spectacle of initiation ritual (close to the ancient *triune unity of chorea*), the innovation of which was a result of reaching to the archaic sources of theatre” (Flaszen 1999).

An interesting remark on the relation between theatre and dance can be found in the correspondence of Paul Claudel with Jacques Copeau. On 17 August 1926, Claudel wrote to Copeau about the Japanese *nō* and his own two scripts inspired by Far East patterns – a “ballet” script *Woman and Her Shadow* and a “Japanese” script *The Tribe of the Broken*:

“You rightly admire *nō* theatre. In France, however, it is difficult to get any idea of it. There will always be a lack of music, miming and this special atmosphere, gloomy and supernatural. You will learn about it from my extensive study. It shows that the basis of the actor’s art is dance, which cannot go without some rhythmic accompaniment. If I could have started my life anew, I would have written music to my dramas myself, composing it not from the point of view of a musician but of a playwright because these are fundamentally different concepts. [...] In every art in which the human body plays some role, this role must be led by ear, and so – music [...]” (Claudel 1971: 123)

On 26 September 1926, Copeau answered:

“Dear friend [...] again I have to repeat: what a pity we had not met before. [...] What you are saying about the connection between dance and theatre was the starting point of all my search. Never could I accomplish them because in the way there stood the questions of exploitation, and the fact that I dealt with various authors, not at all educated in the art

of drama. This is one of the reasons that I have withdrawn into my shell again." (Reklewska, Puzyna 1972: 27)

After this additional explanation for his leaving of Vieux-Colombier and emigration to the country, as well as for his rejection of a "normal" dramaturgy for the scripts written specially for the company, he says:

"An actor is nothing but a dancer. A play which does not include some kind of dance dies on stage. What we pretentiously call staging consists in composing some artificial dance in a drama which does not include it."

And then:

"I am looking for a musician who would like to collaborate with me on a constant basis. Speaking about a musician, I mean someone who would teach me the elements necessary for expressing in the language of music." (Reklewska, Puzyna 1972: 27)⁸

I will return now to the already mentioned apocryphal *The Acts of John*. Here are the words of Jesus quoted there:

"I have suffered nothing of that which they will say about me; but also that suffering which I showed to you and the others in my dance I want to have called a mystery..." (Rudolph 1983: 169-170)

A well-known scholar of gnosis and gnosticism, Kurt Rudolph writes about it as follows:

"In *The Acts of John* we can even find a dance with antiphonal responses which the community of Jesus' disciples performed in an exemplary manner with their Lord in the midst. It evidently served to depict the joy and the harmony of the redeemed universes and thus has an eschatological significance. «Grace dances. I will play on the flute, let everyone dance... Whoever does not dance does not recognise what is taking place»." (Rudolph 1983: 251)

Maria-Gabriele Wosien in her book about sacred dance adds:

"The image of a dancing Jesus was alive in the gnostic circles. In the *New Testament* apocrypha (*The Acts of Saint John* 94-96) the movement

⁸ Correspondence of Copeau with Claudel and Gide, "Cahiers de la Compagnie Madelaine Renaud – Jean Louis Barrault" 1959, issue 27. Emphasis Z.O.

of God's love in Christ has the form of the dance performed by Christ together with the twelve apostles; until the fourth century this dance was imitated as an initiation rite. The dance serves for the mystical union (*unio mystica*) with God." (Lurker 1994: 351)

Grotowski invariably emphasised that the work materials in his Workcenter, in the group led by Thomas Richards, were old, archaic songs (Osiński 1997: 383-398; 1998: 167-214). Some of the people writing about *Action* recognised the text source of some of its fragments in the gnostic *Gospels of Thomas*, even identifying some of the logions. I will only add that the text material for the other group at the Workcenter that worked (until 1993) under the direction of a Haitian, Maud Robart, was another classical gnostic text: *The Hymn of the Pearl* (better known as *The Song of the Pearl*), from the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, which was translated/paraphrased into Polish by Czesław Miłosz (Miłosz 1983; Jonas 1994: 128-144; Prokopiuk 2000: 25-47). It will be useful, however, to recall here what was written in relation to *The Song of the Pearl* by the already mentioned Kurt Rudolph:

"The whole of the so-called *Hymn of the Pearl* as well as many of the Mandaean texts could not be understood without the idea sketched here, according to which "the saviour" (*salvator*) and "the one to be saved" (*salvandus*) belong closely together and are sometimes difficult to keep apart in the text, since the point of view may swiftly change, from "the saviour" (*salvator*) to "the one to be saved" (*salvandus*) and vice versa. Behind this stands the conception – fundamental to Gnostic soteriology – that both partners, *salvator* and *salvandus*, are of one nature, i.e. they form particles of the light. In the process of redemption they remain two poles which must indeed be distinguished, but which through their consubstantiality have beforehand removed or 'loosened' the universal distinction in the history of religion between the saviour and the saved. Hence the Christ who appears as a Seth Redivivus in the *Second Logos of the Great Seth* can say: «When I came in to my own and united myself with them, there was no need for many words, for our 'insight' (*ennoia*) was with their 'insight' (*ennoia*), therefore they understood everything that I said»."

(*Nag-Hammadi Codex*, VII, 2, 59, 9-15) (Rudolph 1983: 122-131)

I would draw attention to the concurrence of Thomas Richard's name and "hagios Thomas" from *The Gospels of Thomas* (original title: *peuaggelion pkata thomas*) which is a collection of one hundred and fourteen logions of Jesus, found in a Coptic translation in the Nag Hammadi rolls in Egypt (Dembska, Myszor 1992).

It should be mentioned that *The Gospels of Thomas* from the second Codex from Nag Hammadi does not show any connection with another *Gospel of Thomas*, the so called

Gospel of the Childhood of Thomas, or *The Childhood of the Lord* (Starowieyski 1986: 254-276). It is a story of the childhood of Jesus, the original of which most probably existed in the Syrian language.

A completely unique work from the apocrypha has already been mentioned – *The Acts of Thomas*, one of the five great apocryphal acts. Written in Greek or Syrian (both versions are known, the original was most probably Syrian), they also include poetical fragments, such as *The Song of Sophia*, and most important of all the famous *Hymn of the Pearl*, considered to be "the most touching, the most dramatic description of the gnostic myth of amnesia and anamnesis" (Eliade 1994: 248-249).

Action from the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards includes a lucid scenario of initiation. There is a miraculous birth of a being of a clearly double nature. Like the double nature of Dionysus, a god and at the same time a mortal, born from the divine Zeus and a mortal woman, persecuted and yet victorious, murdered and brought back to life, so the nature of Jesus is also double, a human being and a god at the same time. Grotowski was specially fascinated by the phenomenon of Jesus's humanity. Till the end of my life I will remember a meeting on 4 January 1997 in one of the cafés on Wrocław Market Square, when he told me:

"Undoubtedly, Jesus was a physically existing human being. An example of this is the scene where he draws a circle in the sand in order to have time to think. It is after all just about a man. What is more, it is very true psychologically. However, he was an extraordinary man."

And further:

"I do not believe in the resurrection at all. This man that was met by the pupils on the way to Emmaus is someone else. There is no certainty whether it was a physical being. «Touch my side» – it is not impossible. If, let's say, I am a Hindu, such things are possible."⁹

That very image of Jesus drawing a circle in the sand became for Grotowski an image of great importance.

In one fragment of *Action* Thomas Richards appears, bringing a red bundle with a figurine. What is it? His totem? Or perhaps a birthday gift, as Lisa Wolford writes? (Wolford 1999: 23). According to one of the doers in *Action*, Brian Watt, whom I asked about this, it is an *asson* – that is, a musical instrument, and at the same time a sacred object in Haitian voodoo. To the same question Grotowski replied in a more mysterious way. He only told me that "it is an object from the childhood of Thomas".¹⁰ If we accepted such an explanation, we would deal here with a child's toy resembling a rattle,

⁹ According to my record from this meeting.

¹⁰ In Pontedera in the summer of 1996 I spoke on the 27 July with Brian Watt and during the night of 28/29 July with Grotowski.

or just a kind of a rattle known as “crepundia” or “signa”. This is how Eliade describes its meaning:

“[...] «mystical toys» (top, little top, dice and mirrors) attested already in the third century BC in the Fayum Papyrus (Gurub). With the same toys the titans (sent by Hera) managed to lure the Dionysus-Zagreus child, whom they afterwards murdered and chopped into pieces. This myth was transmitted to us by a few Christian authors, but it was also known to two writers initiated into the mysteries – Plutarch and Apuleius – as well as to the Orphis brotherhood of Hellenistic Egypt.” (Eliade 1994: 186)

And in another place we read:

“*Crepundia* (a Latin word) stands for various small objects (mirrors, rattles, dice, top, little top, ball, for instance in the shape of animals, little swords, hatchets) made of precious metal, ivory etc, that were carried along in order to break the spell. The name comes from the rattling (*crepare* – to rattle) made by them when moved.”¹¹

Now, it is worth examining in this perspective the existing descriptions of *Action*. Lisa Wolford, who surely consulted with Grotowski and Richards, and whose extensive description was made in Pontedera (Wolford 1999: 18-27) gives a great deal of attention to this object. She writes about a toy, a rattle and so on, but she never uses the name of *asson*. If she does, it is for the writer just the crepundia of little Dionysus-Zagreus; she omits, however, everything that connects it with a toy of little Jesus.

Jacek Dobrowolski in an article with the characteristic title: *Tańczący Zbawiciel Jerzego Grotowskiego* [*The Dancing Salvator of Jerzy Grotowski*], which – as the author tells us – was advised on not by the actual authors of *Action*, but by scholars African studies from the Warsaw University, uses the term of *asson* in both meanings – a musical instrument and a toy, that is the crepundia:

“Apart from the cane the corypheus [Thomas Richards] for some time also holds a round gourd-*calabash*. It is a so-called *asson*, a rattle of a voodoo priest, an instrument originating from West Africa. Inside there is usually a clay snake, though sometimes a snake’s spine is attached outside. *Asson* is an object of magical power and it serves among others to bring people back from trance.” (Dobrowolski 1998: 41)

Action is also a recollection of the tradition of *the triune unity of chorea*, recognisable at once due to the union of music, dance and singing or incantation. Practically since

¹¹ *Mała encyklopedia kultury antycznej A-Z*. 1983. Wydanie piąte. Warszawa, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe: 166. [*Small Encyclopaedia of Ancient Culture A-Z*. 1983. Fifth edition. Warsaw, State Publishing House]

Forefathers' Eve "set to the words of Adam Mickiewicz" in the Opole Theatre of 13 Rows, Grotowski had been interested in incantation as a director, and later on he used it in all of his theatre works, every time however in a different way. Of course, it is not coincidental that it had started during the work on *Forefathers' Eve* by Mickiewicz, that is in the spring of 1961, as in the author's foreword to this piece (Mickiewicz 1995: 13-14) he talks about "ritual songs, sorcery and incantations [...], taken mostly truly, and sometimes literally from communal poetry". Not only did Grotowski remember it perfectly, but also used to recall this whenever an opportunity occurred, which I witnessed.

As Eliade states, in opposition to the ancient mysteries, "Christianity did not know the sacramental quality of sexuality" (Eliade 1994: 187). In this sense *Action* seems to be closer to the Christian tradition rather than to that of the mysteries, with this reservation however, that the symbolism of initiation is common, connecting Dionysus, Zagreus and Jesus. All over the world this symbolism is connected with the god child and it reveals the mystery of the "rebirth" of a mystical character (Eliade 1988: 256-259). Both traditions – that of the mysteries and that of Christianity – are blended in *Action* also by the fact that it seems to be an ethnodrama (to a great extent a concealed one), combining theatre and ritual. A reference to the ritual beginning of theatre is evident here. Besides, it is a Haitian psychiatrist, Louis Mars, one of the greatest experts in voodoo, who is universally considered to be the author of the term "ethnodrama". He recognised in it "activities of both a religious and a dramatic character, referring to the beginning of theatre and folk beliefs" (Mars 1966; Lorelle 1974). In June 1978 professor Mars was invited by Grotowski to the international symposium "The Art of the Debutant" in Warsaw and in Grzegorzewice near Warsaw (Grotowski 1978: 2-11; Czekanowska 1978; Osiński 1978: 18-20), where he presented his understanding of ethnodrama as "a dramatic religion" (Mars 1978: 44-49; 1989: 106-114).

In a letter of 15 September 1963, addressed to Cheruthuruthy in Kerala, where there is the seat of the famous kathakali school, Grotowski informed Barba about Wanda Dynowska (1888-1971), who was highly esteemed by Ramana Maharishi collaborator of Gandhi, and who together with him prepared the organisation of education and the framework of the new system in India; a great proponent of the idea of Indo-Polish rapprochement (among others, she was the founder, organiser, editor, author and translator of the esteemed Polish-Indian Library) (Gerlach 1971: 433-434; Margul 1980: 63-71):

"Don't forget, incidentally, that Mrs. Wanda Dynowska (known in India by the name Uma Devi) lives in Adyar, near Madras. She is responsible for the Polish-Indian Library. She is a very nice lady, although a religious type rather like Blavatska. In her time she showed interest in our *Shakuntala*."
(Barba 1999: 121)

Once Grotowski told me that there were even preparations undertaken to bring the Opole *Shakuntala* to India. In order to do this, in the spring of 1961 in the seat of the

Polish-Indian Society in Wierzbowa Street there was a single presentation of fragments of the performance.¹²

In the same letter to Barba, Grotowski mentions the name of a young Indologist present in India at that time, Maria Krzysztof Byrski, whose parents from the beginning of the activities of the Laboratory Theatre directed by Grotowski and Flaszen belonged to a very small circle of the allies and friends of this institution, and continued, by the way, till the end of their lives (Osiński 2005).

On the Sunday afternoon of 30 March 1969 in Wrocław, on the invitation of Grotowski, Maria Krzysztof Byrski delivered a lecture to the team of the Laboratory Theatre on the subject of *Teatr i ofiara* [*Theatre and Sacrifice*] (Byrski 1968: 27-31),¹³ and in August of the same year in the "Dialog" the already mentioned text, *Grotowski a tradycja indyjska* [*Grotowski and the Indian Tradition*] (Byrski 1969), was published.

Shortly after the Laboratory Theatre moved from Opole to Wrocław, Grotowski writes to Barba in a letter of 6 February 1965:

"I have spent the last few weeks thinking back and comparing the past with what needs to be done and built. The transfer of the ashram, even without any changes, will in itself produce a different ashram. To continue in the same metaphor: the Opole period is Maharishi in Arunachala's hermitage; Wrocław, on the other hand, will be Aurobindo's ashram in Pondichery (a hermitage-institute that lives amid the din of a big city). But perhaps the comparison with an ashram is no longer possible."

(Barba 1999: 140)

The quoted fragment is provided by the author of the letter with a footnote informing us that in Opole Grotowski had a picture of Ramana Maharishi hanging on the wall above his bed; it was taken in the beginning of the fifties by his brother, Kazimierz, at present a professor of physics at the Jagiellonian University. He showed it to Barba and talked a lot about the book by Paul Brunton *A Search in Secret India* (Brunton 1939) that his mother had given to him when he was nine years old. In October 1994 and for the last time in 1996, he told Barba that he still considered Ramana Maharishi to be his master (Barba 1999: 48, 54, 140). The book *A Search in Secret India* by Paul Brunton, translated by Wanda Dynowska, became one of the books of his life (Osiński 1980: 15-16; Raszewski 1997: 47-50). This is where the above mentioned photograph came from, and in the extremely carefully assorted library in Pontedera there were copies of it in English, French, Italian, and also the Polish translation by Dynowska. The part dedicated to Ramana Maharishi Grotowski used to give to every person working with him to read. Among others, Brunton writes there:

¹² In the seventies, when I was engaged on this matter, I tried to find out something more about this event. Unfortunately, without success: I was told there was no documentation left.

¹³ A seven-page typescript of the lecture is in the collection of the Centre of Jerzy Grotowski in Wrocław.

"For the sage treats all creeds alike, regards them all as significant and sincere expressions of a great experience, and honours Jesus no less than Krishna." (Brunton 1999: 296)

Thus understood ecumenism was also very close to Grotowski, and Brunton's book accompanied him in this "dance" of his life. It could not have failed to have a deep influence on his way of thinking and his attitude as an artist. It can be said that the whole successive creative path of Grotowski, its trajectory along with the motives and themes appearing in it, was indicated/projected in a surprising way by his early reading while still a boy: *A Search in Secret India* by Paul Brunton, *The Life of Jesus* by Renan, the *Gospels* read in a closet above the pigsty as the book had been prohibited by the catechist-rector:

"I would say that the reading of the Gospels in the company of pigs, in secrecy from the catechist and in conspiracy with the curate was my initiatory experience of Christianity."

(Grotowski 1980: 119; Osiński 1993: 24-40)

And all this took place during the war, spent with his mother and brother in Nienadówka village near Rzeszów:

"The time I passed in the village was wartime. One day my mother set out to the city in order to find books, because she was convinced that some books can be nourishment. Then she brought two – *The Life of Jesus* by Renan and *A Search in Secret India* by Brunton. The book of Renan was forbidden by the Church, but my mother considered it an extremely important story about Jesus, and often repeated that for her it was the «fifth Gospel».

Mother was practising the most ecumenical Catholicism. She still underlined that for her no one religion had a monopoly on truth. Her interest in the traditions of India was deep and stable. It was not by chance that she brought into the village for her children the book of Brunton. She repeated to me that intellectually (that is, because of her opinions), she felt herself to be Buddhist. She was also accepting persons whose attitudes were clearly not religious. It seemed logical enough, but during her confessions in the church it caused some funny discussions with the priest. Also because she emphasised in the time of confession that in her opinion, if humans have souls, then surely animals have also."

(Wolford, Schechner 1997: 251)

At the turn of 1976 and 1977, Grotowski and his mother made a three-week journey to India. It was a three-week trip organised by a Polish travel agency. They visited

the ashram of Ramana Maharishi at the foot of the holy mountain, Arunachala. Emilia Grotowska was 78 by that time.

On 26 January 1998, the founder of the Laboratory Theatre as a professor of Collège de France delivered his last lecture in Théâtre du Rond-Point Renaud-Barrault, dedicating it to Ramana Maharishi. The last wish of Jerzy Grotowski was that his ashes be taken to the Arunachala mountain, close to the ashram of the Indian sage. It was fulfilled by Mario Biagini and Thomas Richards, his closest collaborators in the last period of his life, and at that time assigned by him to be his heirs.

*Translated by Justyna Rodzińska**

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